

Oral History Program: Biographical Notes

Neville Albert WHIFFEN (1912 - 2004)

Chemical Engineer

- Birth & Family:** Born 4 December 1912 in Leichhardt, Sydney.
- Education:** Attended Primary School at Kogarah Superior Public School, then to Sydney Technical High School at Paddington where he matriculated. Attended the Institute of Technology, later called NSW University of Technology where he gained his Master's Degree.
- Qualifications:** M.Sc., C.Eng (UK)
- Memberships:** FIEAust., FSTC, FRSC, FRACI, FI.Chem.E, FAIM
- Awards:** The Medal of Freedom (United States) – Citation; Institution of Chemical Engineers (Lon.) Medal 1971; R K Murphy Medal, Royal Australian Chemical Engineers 1979.
- Work History:** Whiffen obtained a traineeship as a Chemical Engineer - a new profession - with the Municipal Council of Sydney (shortly afterwards re-named the Sydney County Council Electricity Undertaking, which became the Electricity Commission and later Pacific Power).
- He initially worked with feedwater and cooling water at Pyrmont and Bunnerong Power Stations. Whiffen later gained a Fellowship in Chemical Engineering for his work on the design of circulation in high pressure boilers – this work had not been done before. Whiffen believes that being the first Chemical Engineer had its advantages! In 1936-37 Whiffen took leave of absence to go to the UK to take up a studentship as a graduate engineer/trainee for Parsons Turbines & Rayrow Electrical Switchgear, travelling extensively around the UK.
- During World War 2, Whiffen's attempts to enlist in the armed forces were unsuccessful because the Electricity Undertaking refused to release him. However, in 1943 he was allowed to accept an invitation to join the Australian Legation in Washington, USA, as the first Scientific Liaison Officer for Australia, covering Canada and the USA.
- Sir Frederick White, head of Radio Physics in CSIRO, had requested Whiffen to study tropicalisation: the effect that tropical conditions had on equipment. During his visits to various US research establishments Whiffen found that while the Americans were aware of the problem, nothing was being done in this regard; their military equipment was being designed for European weather conditions but sent to the tropics with disastrous results. His work resulted in the formation of the Army-Airforce-Navy Committee on Tropical Deterioration at the request of President Roosevelt, with Whiffen being appointed by the British and Australian Governments as the British War Cabinet Representative, one of ten members of the Steering Committee. For his work, Whiffen was awarded the highest American civilian honour, the Medal of Freedom, however Dr Evatt would not allow him to accept a foreign medal, and it was some decades before he finally received it.

He was also a member of the Australian Delegation of UNESCO and at the request of both the Australian and US Navies was involved with the Bureau of Ships for four years observing the marine fouling of ships.

During this time, Whiffen was asked by the Department of Health and Dr Eddy, Head of the Commonwealth X-Ray and Radium Laboratory to locate isotopes, as none were made in Australia at that time. He was successful and sent isotopes by air back to Australia in 1944. During this time he was also involved in work for aircraft manufacturers studying the life of aircraft and metal fatigue, and was asked by CSIRO in Melbourne to study wooden aircraft manufacture. Whiffen came back to Australia to brief the Services in 1944 and returned to the US in 1945 with his family for another three years.

In 1946 Whiffen's involvement in the writing of President Truman's speech concerning the supply of isotopes to the free world resulted in Australia becoming the first country in the world to receive radioactive isotopes for medical applications. Whiffen had also been asked to monitor the move to shift control of atomic energy away from the Defence Department and into civilian hands. Following this, the United States Atomic Energy Commission was formed, with Whiffen as the first Liaison Officer.

While still continuing his work within the aircraft industry, Whiffen was asked to concentrate on new developments in the textile (particularly wool) and food industries. He then returned to Australia to help set up the Wool Textile Research Laboratories for the CSIRO, resulting in three divisions in Melbourne, Sydney and Geelong.

Whiffen was seconded from this position to take up the role of Executive Director of the Federal Cabinet Committee on Sulphuric Acid, at the request of Sir Ian Clunies Ross. Within a year, his efforts resulted in an Act of Parliament being passed for the control of the use of sulphur. Whiffen was also responsible for the erection of port facilities at Norseman in Western Australia and Gladstone in Queensland, as well as the formation of a new company, Sulphuric Acid Limited, in South Australia.

On his return to the CSIRO, Whiffen was placed in charge of the Wool Textile Liaison Office, which was a link between world research developments in the textile industry and the users, i.e. the people who spun the yarns and made the fabrics.

Whiffen's next move was into the paper industry when he was asked by [Sir] Harry Somerset to be Manager of overall operations for APPM (Associated Pulp & Paper Mills). He relocated to Burnie, in Tasmania, and set up a Development Division to develop new products.

When his request for a position on the Board was rejected – it was not APPM's policy to appoint Operations Executives as Board Members – Whiffen accepted an invitation to join Berger Paints as Managing Director, where he introduced Berger Breeze, a new type of paint.

Whiffen was then invited to join Amalgamated Chemicals as General Manager, then shortly afterwards became Managing Director. As he had done in previous roles, Whiffen then began introducing new products and supplied, tested and serviced sprays for Auscot for use in the new cotton industry.

He then accepted an invitation to take up a new appointment with Abbott Laboratories as Director of Pacific & Far East Operations, (after a brief time with Pfizer Chemicals). Whiffen became Managing Director of Abbott Australasia, later declining the position of Vice President because

it would have meant relocating to the United States. He retired at 65, but remaining on as Chairman of Tasmanian Alkaloids; he retired again at 67 after the company was sold to Johnson & Johnson.

Following a request by General Foods Company of New York to be their prime consultant in Australia and to work with them on the launch of a new product, Whiffen established his own company, Nethal Pty Ltd. He then became involved in total quality and introduced it into General Foods.

Consultancy work in aquaculture followed, until an approach by Norman Teek, the founder of Franklins Stores, led to Whiffen being appointed as Executive Director of the Canberra Development Board, and he spent the next four and a half years promoting Australia overseas. He also started the National Technology Centre and National Technology Park; developed the idea for a National Convention Centre; created the National Science Summer School that opened in 1984 - of which he was Executive Director and Chairman.

Whiffen provided consultancy services to set up the blueberry tourist industry, and also consulted on furniture production in Grafton using Australian hardwoods, as well as on hydroponics and fish production in ponds instead of rivers – industries which would provide employment in a proposed new township. At the time of interview he was actively interested in the farming of saltwater fish.

During his career, Whiffen was a member of numerous professional bodies and institutions and held office on various committees connected with engineering and chemical engineering and remained active in many of these long after his retirement. He died on January 2, 2004.

Prepared by Jill Willis, September 2004 from oral history interview conducted on 04.08.1993.